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LIFE, LITERATURE, AND SPIRITUALITY IN FRANCE¹

I SUPPOSE it is because we are in the immensity of America that I have been asked to enter into this immense subject, Literature and Life, and one of your friends told me only yesterday that I would also give you pleasure if I also spoke, as a French woman, a few words on the matter of Spirituality. This is another immense and complex subject. I was feeling somehow at a loss when I remembered reading in La Fontaine's *Psyche* that the smallest little creature in the wood—a "bestiole"—an ant, ran 4000 miles in 24 hours to pay her obeisance to a Princess. Well, my friends, you are the Princess and I am the ant—I have already run a good long way to come and see you—and I shall run over the 4000 miles of this immense subject in as few words as I can.

What literature means to us, eager readers, is a question which we do not often ask ourselves—it is what blood is to the body. Literature comes to us almost with the milk we suck on our mothers' breasts, when they sing or hum over our cradles the old songs, and later on it is still literature with the fairy tales and poetry. As soon as a child is six years old, he learns the *Fables de La Fontaine*, the English nursery rhymes—and celebrating the birthday of papa and mamma, will recite some verse like the Child's prayer

¹A discourse read in English by Mme. Saint-René Taillandier, delegate of the Commission des Dames du Comité France-Amérique, in the Faculty Chamber of the Rice Institute, April 2, 1937.

of Lamartine. If you ask a little French boy what he will have for his Christmas present he'll say "a mechanic toy first"—"and a book"—which he has already an eye on in the bookseller' shop; the little girls will ask for a doll—those little mothers dote on their dolls and make all sorts of literature about young motherhood—a doll *and* a book—and so on. When they are ten or twelve you will find them, both, lying flat on the floor, perfectly deaf to the din and buzz of life around them, their cheeks getting quite red—the little lad over travels and adventures, the girlie shedding her first tears of romance over the abandoned Princess and leaping for joy when the Prince comes back, and of course they are very happy together and have many, many children.

And as we grow older, literature grows ever closer and closer to us—young men and young ladies become very curious to know what life really is or is going to be in the world they do not see—and as youth vanishes, and maturity and old age ripple along, it will be, mostly, for many of us, in our quiet homes and through literature that our short lives (ah! so short!) keep in communication with the hidden world, with the beyond—what Browning calls the other side of the moon—with foreign countries—with the history and conflicts of human souls, the near ones, the far-away ones. Without literature, without art, don't you think each of us would be in the world like Robinson Crusoe, shifting all alone for himself? I believe that literature answers to the eager need and desire that, from childhood to the end, we have to escape from the narrow limits of our very small selves. That sort of evasion is a craving as strong, if not as definite, as the necessity to eat or drink. It answers to our need of giving and receiving sympathy, of liking, disliking, discussing, knowing, of being, of dreaming. Some-

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times we ask for imagination, sometimes for reality—sometimes, we like to find the mysteries of our own souls made a little clearer to us. Sometimes we like to wander away to foreign people and lands, customs, aspects of nature, dramas of the land and sea, heroes and situations.

I suppose you would perhaps like to interrupt me here—very discreetly—with a question—Well, I will ask it for you. “Is French literature the real description of life in France? because you know it is not considered as a very moral sort of literature.” Well, I know that, and to be fair, you must admit that in the matter of morals, French literature does not stand alone in the present time as so crude and bold. What shall I answer—“Yes and No at the same time” like the Normans—as we French say, “Il y a de tout dans tout.” What I can say is that, for the most part, the French writer is an artist—his aim in general is not to teach but to see and to paint—to look at Nature full in the face with its good and evil; yes, and evil, its temptations, its sins. Yes, its sins for they are part of human nature; we hate preaching. We hate to make believe; some of our writers are like the student doctors who need to know the diseases of the body if they want to cure them, and how they grow, at least to know and make known what they are: horrors are also life. Moreover, and just because life in our quiet homes is often very dull and monotonous, full of small cares, we like to find, in literature, that throbbing pulse of passion which is not, for all or for ever, so very throbbing at home. You know our French adage: “Les peuples heureux n’ont pas d’histoire.” A man who has been worrying at his office all day is glad to find wife and children and ask for his slippers and a dietic supper of soup and vegetables: that is the story of a “peuple heureux” which is no story at all—but he will love to read a book telling of the bold passion

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which the dear man will never have. So will his dutiful wife. They fly away from sweet and dutiful reality which they could not do without—go and see at the theatre how the old goddess Love leads imaginary men and women for one brief moment to happiness and generally in the end drives them to despair. That will be the escape of many, many toilers. On the whole, the old love stories, what we call the triangular dramas—“a wife, a husband, and a lover”—do not fill our literature in the present time as much as they did seventy years ago. Life has become too serious. The necessity for young men and girls working hard to enter early on hard careers—the roaming over the world on the air or land and on the sea have taken up, have filled that passion for the “beyond” which I was speaking of. Young men and women, well, I suppose and I hope they will have their love stories, and even the triangular menace, but what they love is to hear the pulsation of the wide, wide world. If you go over the literature of the past ten years you will find what place foreign, far-off-lands, customs, descriptions of nature take in our best-loved books.

For, now the ant is coming to spirituality. The tendency in France has been to follow the material progress which enables the nations to communicate with each other and exchange not only pepper and other spices or the furs of the beavers for European goods but to exchange their thoughts and ideals. It was a long time, almost two centuries, before Shakespeare was known and loved in France. We lived on our own, with its perfection and its limits. At the present moment there is hardly an important work in England, Italy, America, Germany, or Spain that is not translated in French, criticized, discussed, borrowed, loaned, produced in the theaters and not only the new ones, but also the old ones. I often notice that English authors are sup-

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posed to be influenced by French writers: for instance that Mrs. Virginia Woolf in England, it is said, owes very much to Marcel Proust, but then a few years later I shall hear that a young French writer owes his best to Virginia Woolf who is herself such a debtor to Marcel Proust. I am not a very good judge of these technical matters, being nothing of a technician myself. I am naturally inclined to believe that it is easier to let life speak for itself and flow as it comes than to cripple one's mind and arm and pen to imitate a very good author; for the better he is, the more difficult it would be to imitate. Our tendency is to reach the Universal. I think that Paul Claudel among our elder writers is the one who has expressed that rhythm of healing of the universal heart.

To make it short or shorter, if you should wish to find out the very complex shades of spirituality in France, I think you would have great pleasure in going over there and roaming in your car over my own dear country. I shall ask you not to buy every evening the heavy newspapers in which you will find, for the enrichment of certain "alligators" and the lower amusement of the people, all the crimes, pistol shots, gangster exploits of today and yesterday, the portraits of murderers, and say it is commercialization which has nothing to do with spirituality. It sells, I am sorry to say, better than an idealistic poem. The spiritual life in France is I should say a secret one, coming from far-off times and ebbing silently on the shore. It is also like fire on the bosom of the earth: it is elemental both in the air and in the soil. It takes all sorts of aspects and forms: it is highly individual, often very different among friends and even members of the same family—one Catholic may not even resemble another, I know this being one myself. Spirituality is under no formulas, no obligations. Religion has its disciplines and

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its freedom, its letter and its spirit. You are free, free, only by mishap you belong to a political party, and I will say that for the sake of women's spiritual life I am in no hurry that we should make the "Great Conquest": votes for women. I might be asked to belong to this association or that, to vote for this gentleman and not for that one: oh I love, how I love the freedom of my mind and of my soul. Of course the vote will come, but I sometimes believe that we women have more influence with the undetermined power of womanhood. Don't we do with our husbands and sons and friends just what we like, and bring them over to our ways of feeling or thinking as long as they don't know it and we are under the magic of discretion and secrecy—the secret wand.

Let me say in behalf of my country that French boys and girls, many young men, most of our men and all the women go in for social work—we are, on this ground far from poetical or dramatic literature, but we are deep in reality. As I was telling you, work or virtue are not matters of art and dream—and we women, social workers, happen to be either ridiculous or solemn bores when we appear in literature—we don't mind and only laugh if the caricature is well done. I do not know one of my many, many friends young and old, the smartest Parisienne or dowdy grand-mamma, Catholic, Protestant, Israelite or nothing at all, who does not devote much of her abilities, time and money, (and very often together on the same board) to some social work. Shall I tell you that I am myself in the staff of the French Red Cross so I know what I say, and I will *not* say that it is "amusant tous les jours" (amusing every day). But there we go deep into the heart of life and its suffering: we work together for years and years with colleagues with whom we would not dream of meeting on other grounds—and

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we live on quite smoothly even with esteem and admiration and find our betters where we would not have thought them. I often think that to us, French people with our so to say devotions, discussions, old and modern prejudices, we are as if standing on the six sides of an Egyptian pyramid. We can't see, and hardly hear those who are not with us; we hear wonderful tales and sometimes distasteful ones as to how those we don't see are made; that one will be supposed to have a tail on its head—and the other to have his eyes behind his back: but when we make the effort to climb up the Pyramid, when we meet on the summit we find ourselves, in the pure air and light of disinterested thought very much alike as to our ideal, aims, and differing only as to the method. We all speak of "mystic" believers, and unbelievers. I should not like to broach the subject of religion; it is a very private one, infinitely varied. We meet in that hope and love which the Don Juan of Molière expressed in a word which at the time seemed bold, impious, and almost scandalous, when, throwing an alms to a beggar, in his impertinent way he did not say "For the love of God," but "For the love of humanity."

That love has spread in our hearts and homes with no enmity to the still higher love of God.

And do you not all of you, my friends, find it a true manifestation of French spirituality that we should have left our homes and daily duties to come over such a long way to see you and hold with you the communion of heroic remembrances. We only ask for such sympathy as, to our delight, we found in Louisiana and Acadia amid the traces of our fore-fathers, their language, and the accent of our provinces. It is nothing material that we bring with us or will take back. What we have meant is to bring to you a breath of France's spirit and memories—and breathe your own air

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and sympathies, ah! just for two or three days, but for long dreamings and remembrances. I am taking home all the cards, flowers and ribbons that will tell my people of your welcome. I should like you to salute us, my friends, with the hailing of the much loved Shelley to the passing skylark—"Hail to thee, blithe spirit!"—And we return the salute.

MME. SAINT-RENÉ TAILLANDIER.